

THE STONE¹

By HENRY GOODMAN

From The Pictorial Review

MARTHA SLOAN is goin' the way o' Jim," said Deems Lennon to his wife. "See," and he pointed through the open window toward the cemetery. "I seen her before Jim's stone, beggin' on her knees an' mumblin' with her hands stretched out. She been that way a number o' times when I come upon her as I was fixin' up the graves."

Mrs. Lennon, a stout, pleasant-faced woman, looked in the direction indicated by her husband. Together they watched Martha Sloan, white-haired, thin, and bent, making her way up the cemetery path. She was nervous and her walk was broken by little, sudden pauses in which she looked about.

"Poor soul," said Mrs. Lennon, "she's afraid. She ain't been herself sence Dorothy died. Losin' the two children right after Jim has broken her up completely."

"She's afraid for herself," said her husband. "If you heard her up there by that stone you'd have thought she was speakin' to some one alive, to some one who could do her things."

"Oh well, that's enough to make any one queer," Mrs. Lennon said. Then she stopped, and watched the figure on the hillside.

"Look," said Mrs. Lennon, "look at her. She's down on her knees."

Deems stood by her near the window.

"That's it," he exclaimed. "That's exactly what she's been doing now for some time. I heard her speak. I

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don't know where she got the idea. She thinks Jim's following her — reaching out for her — trying to grasp her. I heard her plead. I don't know what'll come of it."

They were both startled when, as suddenly as Martha Sloan had knelt, she rose from her place before the grave-stone and, moving in nervous haste, ran down the pathway.

"Deems, we must go to her," said Mrs. Lennon. "Maybe we can do something for her." And as they both hurried into the kitchen and out of the house, Martha Sloan, panting and white-faced with fright, rushed to the house.

"Deems," she gasped. "Deems, it's Jim. He's reaching out. He's reaching out to seize me."

"Martha, calm yourself," said Deems, taking Martha Sloan's shaking hand in his. "That ain't right. You're sensible. You must n't think so much of it. You must keep your mind away."

"That's right, Martha," Mrs. Lennon said, as she helped Martha Sloan into the house. "You must n't keep thinking of Jim, and keep going up there all the time. There's many things waiting for you at home, and when you're through there why don't you come over to us?"

But Martha Sloan, either not hearing or not heeding the words of Deems and his wife, sat huddled, nervously whispering, more to herself than to her friends. "It's Jim. It's his hand reaching out to me. He took Dorothy. He took Joseph, and he's reaching out now to me. He can't stand having me living."

She was nervous and in the power of a fear that was stronger than her will. She sat uneasily looking about her as if knowing that she was safe in the house of friends, but as if feeling herself momentarily in the presence of something strange and frightful. She cast frightened looks about her, at the room, at Mrs. Lennon, and at Deems. She looked at them in silence as if she did not know how to speak to them until, prompted by great uneasiness, she spoke in a loud whisper, "Take me home. Take me home, Deems. I want to get away."

Deems slipped into his coat, said to his wife, "I'll be back soon," then, helping Martha from the chair, walked out with her.

"Come now, Martha, you know us well enough. We're your friends, are n't we? And we tell you there's nothing to fear. It's all your believing. There's nothing after you. There's nothing you need fear."

"You don't know. It was he took my two children. He took Dorothy. When they laid her out in the parlor, I could just see him standing at her head. He was cruel when he lived. He beat them; Dorothy and Joseph, they hated him. And when they laid out Joseph after his fall, when the bridge gave way, Jim was standing by his head, and his eyes were laughing at me like he'd say, 'I took him, but now there's you.' And he's trying for me now."

Deems was pleased that she was speaking. He hoped that in conversing she would find respite from her thoughts.

"No, Martha," he said, "that was n't Jim took Dorothy and Joseph. You know there's a God that gives and takes. Their years were run. Can't you see, Martha?"

"It was Jim who took. He could n't see them living. When he lived he could n't see them growing up to be themselves. He took them like he took me from you. D' you remember, Deems, how he came and in no time I was his? He owned me completely."

Deems was silent. There was no arguing. Even now there was vividly alive in his mind, and, he knew, in the minds of the other villagers, the recollection of that sense of possession which went with Jim Sloan. He recalled that William Carrol had hanged himself when he could not pay Jim Sloan the debt he owed him. It was true that Jim Sloan had owned his children as if they were pieces of property. The whole village had learned to know this fact soon after these children had grown up. Deems, recalling his feelings for Martha Sloan, remembered now the amazement, the astonishment, with which he had viewed the change that came over Martha immediately after her marriage to Jim Sloan.

She had been light-hearted and joyful as if overflowing with the vitality natural to the country about the village. There had been gladness in her laugh. Immediately after her marriage all this had changed.

Martha had been wont to run lightly about her father's

house. Her movements had become suddenly freighted with a seriousness that was not natural to her. Her laughter quieted to a restrained smile which in turn gave way to a uniform seriousness. The whole village noted and remarked the change. "He is older than she," they said, "and is making her see things as he does."

When they reached the house, Martha, without a word, left Deems and hurried in. Deems turned away, looking back and shaking his head, the while he mumbled to himself, "There's no good in this. There's no good for Martha."

He was struck motionless when suddenly he beheld Martha by the window. He had thought her slightly composed when she had left him, for her manner was more quiet than it had been. Now he was startled. Out of the window she leaned, her eyes fastened on the distant gravestone — white, large, and dominating — a shaft that rose upright like a gigantic spear on the crest of the hill. He watched her face and head and saw that her movements were frightened. As she moved her head — it seemed she was following something with her eyes which, look as closely as he could, he failed to make out — there was a jerkiness of movement that showed her alert and startled.

From the musty, dark parlor Martha looked out on the cemetery. There, clear in the evening light, stood the large white stone — a terrible symbol that held her. To her nervous mind, alive with the creations of her fear, it seemed she could read the lines,

JAMES SLOAN
BORN SEPT. 14, 1857
DIED NOV. 12, 1915

and below it, stamped clearly and illumined by her fright,

HIS FAITHFUL WIFE
MARTHA SLOAN
BORN AUG. 9, 1871. DIED ———

At the thought of the word "Died," followed by the dash, she recoiled. The dash reaching out to her —

reaching to her — swept into her mind all the graspingness of James which had squeezed the sweetness out of life — all the hardness which had marked his possession of her. Was it her mind, prodded by terror, that visualized it? There, seeming to advance from the hill, from the cemetery, from the very gravestone which was beginning to blot and blurr in her vision, she saw a hand — his hand! It was coming — coming to her, to crush what of life was left in her.

Even in her own mind, it was a miracle that she had survived Jim's tenacity. When Jim had died, she began suddenly to recover her former manner of life. She began to win back to herself. It was as if, the siege of Winter having lifted, the breath and warmth of Spring might now again prevail.

Then had come the horrors of uncontrollable dreams followed by the death by fire of Dorothy. That had shaken her completely.

She recalled their rescuing Dorothy, how they had dragged her out of the fire, her clothes all burned off. They had sought to nurse her back to health, and in the week before her daughter died she had learned something of what had happened the night of the fire. In her sleep Dorothy had heard herself called and she thought it was her father's voice. She had arisen when she seemed to see beside her her father as he had looked in life.

She had followed him to the barn and suddenly he had told her that he had come back to take her with him as he had promised to before his death. In her struggle to escape him she had flung the lantern. In the parlor they had laid out Dorothy — a blackened, burnt frame.

All her care and love and solicitude she concentrated on Joseph. She thought that perhaps by an intenser, all embracing love for Joseph she would be enabled to defeat the spell that she felt hanging over her life. Then, when it seemed that life would begin anew to take on a definite meaning — Joseph, grown up, was giving purpose to it — she remembered that some one had knocked timidly on the door and had announced in a frightened voice: "Mrs. Sloan! There's been a terrible accident, the bridge fell — ?" She remembered that she had screamed, "My

Joseph! My boy!" and then had found herself in the parlor, the body laid out on the couch.

She remembered suddenly that the parlor had seemed to contain the presence of Jim. She had looked up to see dimly what seemed the figure and face of her dead husband. In the eyes that seemed to be laughing she read the threat, "I took him, but now there's you."

As these recollections flooded and flowed through her mind, a frightened nervousness seized upon Martha, standing by the window. Somehow she was being held by a fear to move. Something seemed to have robbed her of the strength and resolution to turn from the window.

There came to her the impression that there was some one in the room with her. The feeling grew subtly upon her and added to her fear of turning around. So she kept her eyes looking out of the window up at where the shaft of the gravestone stood. But, more clearly now than before, she sensed something that seemed to reach out from the gravestone and carry to her, and at the same time there grew the feeling that the presence in the room was approaching her.

She was held in fright. All her nervous impulses impelled her to flight. Like a whip that was descending over her head, came the mirage from the gravestone until, in a mad, wild attempt to evade it, she flung about in the room as if to dash across and away from the window. Suddenly she was halted in her passage by the presence of Jim. The dim parlor was somehow filled with a sense of his being there, and in the dusk near the mantelpiece and at the head of the couch, there stood in shadowy outline her husband, come back.

"Jim!" she uttered, in a frightened gasp, and threw her hands outward to protect herself from his purpose. But she saw clearly the shadowy face and eyes that said unmistakably, "I have come for you."

She was terror-bound. There was no advance, for moving forward meant coming closer to that presence, meant walking into his very grasp.

She was about to speak, to plead for herself, to beg, "Jim, leave me."

In her terror and dread of his approach, she turned

hastily to the window and leaped down. Wildly she scrambled up, bruised and shaken, and screaming hoarsely, while in unthinking terror she moved her hands, as if beating off unwelcome hands, she ran pantingly up the road which led to Deems's house.

The silence and the air of happy quietness that filled the house of her friends seemed to lay a spell upon Martha. Caring for her as if she were of the household, Deems and his wife were gratified by the change that apparently was coming over their charge.

In their room, after Martha had bid them good night, Deems questioned his wife.

"And how is Martha behavin', now?"

"You could n't tell she's the same woman. Remember how she was when we found her at the door that night — all mumbling and frightened so she could n't talk? Well, now she's calm and happy like. What she needed was being with some one."

The quietness of her surroundings had had its effect on Martha. They showed in the calm self-possession with which she walked about, persisting in her efforts to help Mrs. Lennon in her household work. The atmosphere of bustling activity — Deems's coming and going from the village, from the cemetery, whither he went with his trowel and spade to keep in repairs the many graves and plots on the hillside — all this seemed to have drawn on some reservoir of unsuspected vitality and composure within Martha.

These were the visible effects. In fact, however, there had grown in Martha's mind a plan — a desire to cut herself forever free of Jim's sinister possession — and this plan she fed from a reservoir of nervous power that was fear and terror converted into cunning and despair. She went about the house not as if relieved of fear of Jim, but cautiously, as if somewhere in back of her mind was a way out, a way out, to win which required care and watchfulness.

In this spirit she observed Deems's movements about the house until she learned where he left his lantern and the box where he put away his trowel and mallet and chisel. Now that the plan was clear in her own mind,

there was nothing to do but carry it out. She would cut the dreadful tie that held her to Jim — the tie, the potency of which gave to the dead man the power of holding her so completely. Reckoning thus, she became wary of her companions as if fearing that they might in some way interfere with her plans if they got wind of them. She knew that her every move was watched, for she found that Mrs. Lennon had constituted herself her guardian. Since her coming to the house, she had never left its shelter, finding at first that companionship and reassurance which gave her courage and resolution against Jim and the power to survive the terror of thought of him, and finding finally that, with the formation of her plan, she would have to conceal it from Deems and his wife. She came to this conclusion in this wise.

One day, in the kitchen she came upon a newly sharpened cleaver, its edge invisibly thin and its broad, flat side gleaming in the sun. Mrs. Lennon was by the window and from without came the sounds of Deems chopping wood.

Her mind was filled with a sudden clearness of thought and, swinging the cleaver in the air, she said to Mrs. Lennon:

"You know — here's how I can break away from Jim. When he reaches out — reaches out for me, I can just cut off his hand."

Mrs. Lennon stood motionless, startled by the unexpected words. She had thought Martha's mind free of all fears of Jim. She was brought up sharply by this sudden speech and gesture. "Deems," she called, "Deems, come here."

Deems had taken the cleaver hastily from Martha's hands, and that night told his wife that Martha would have to be watched closely. He feared that Martha was becoming deranged.

Martha had discovered that she was watched when one night she left her room. She heard the door open and instantly she felt the hands of Mrs. Lennon on her arm and heard a gentle, persuasive voice asking her to return to bed.

It was the next day, in the dusk of a turn in the hall-

way, that Martha once more felt the presence of Jim. If her life in the peaceful household of her friends had brought an outward calm, a mantle of repose and quiet, this was instantly torn up by the vision that formed before her eyes in the half dim hallway. Instantly she was the old Martha, held in the grasp of terror. Her face was 'drawn in tense, white lines, her lips were deformed, and with trembling gaunt hands she thrust back the apparition. Her screams, "Jim, let me be, let me be," brought Mrs. Lennon running and called Deems from his work in the wood-shed.

They found her in a faint on the floor. They carried her to her room and put her to bed, Mrs. Lennon speaking to her, soothing and trying to bring her back to her former calm.

There followed a few days of rain which seemed in some way to make Martha less uneasy and restless. Deems and his wife, seeing her silent and apparently resting, felt that slowly the terror she had been suffering was being washed out. Martha's attitude encouraged this feeling. She rested in silence, attentive to the dropping of the rain and learning once more to wear her old-time composure.

When Deems returned toward nightfall one day, it was with the news that the incessant rains had done serious damage in the cemetery. Dripping from the drenching he had received in his tour of inspection, his boots muddy, and his hands dirty from holding to the precarious bushes, he shook with cold as he reported on what he had found. In his narrative he had quite forgotten the presence of Martha who sat by, silent and waxen-faced.

"And you ought to see," he said, turning to his wife, "how the rain has run down those graves. You know, it's loosened Jim Sloan's stone so, I'm afraid it'll fall against the first heavy blow."

Martha's exclamation "Oh!" recalled to him her presence. He stopped talking for a while, then hoping to blot out the effects of his statement he began a lively story of the number of trees that had fallen across the road, and how he had been told that over at Rampaco the post-office had been struck by lightning.

He did not know it, but Martha was deaf to his reports.

She had her own thoughts. She felt herself curiously strong of will, and there raced in her blood the high determination to act that very night. Not for nothing had she spent the rain drenched days in terrified silence in her room. All of her energies that were still capable of being mustered to her resolve, she had converted in the crucible of her will, and huddled in terror, she had forged the determination to go out when the time came and to cut herself free of the fiendish power that was searing her mind and slowly crushing her. She remembered that in her faint, when she lay limp and inert, a thing of dread, she had felt herself crumple up at the touch of Jim — Jim reaching out to her. Now she would cut herself free of him at the very source of his power over her. She would go that very night.

She cast a glance toward the closet where Deems kept his trowel and chisel. She would have need of them, she knew. She said "Good night" rather more loudly and vehemently than she had intended, for she was feeling nervous.

She was awakened by a feeling of cold. As she sat up she saw that the door was open. What was it drew her eyes through the hallway and out into the open and brought her up suddenly? There came upon her an eeriness that startled and chilled her, and suddenly, as if it were coming at her through the open door, fingers out-thrust, there appeared the hand.

She was out of bed on the instant. Somehow in her throat she repressed the upstartled cry, "Jim," by an effort that strained all her nerves and made her face bloodless white. She could not, however, repress completely the instinctive movement of her hands to ward off the menacing hand. Suddenly a panic seized her and in terrified haste she moved to the closet and, feeling a moment, took what she knew was Deems's chisel.

Do what she could, she could not stem the flow of panic, and suddenly as she began to pant and breathe heavily with the strain of terror, she began also to gasp her pleadings to Jim.

"Don't, Jim. Don't take me," and, as if not at all of her own volition, but at that of a guiding power, she

moved out of the house, ghastly in the night, mumbling and shivering.

She was still atremble — she was now chilled by the dampness of ground and air — when she stood by Jim Sloan's gravestone. White it gleamed against the sky, and now Martha's trembling and murmuring turned into a furious industry as she raised the chisel to the stone.

"Jim — you'll let me be, won't you? You'll let me be? I want 'a live yet." She began a frenzied hacking at the gravestone, seeing nothing but the play of her chisel, and the white, fearful stone towering over her, hearing nothing but the rasp of the chisel — not even hearing the rattle of the loosened gravel as it slid from under the stone.

Deems Lennon and his wife were awakened by a heavy crash. "What can it be?" he asked his wife, and then left the bed and ran up to Martha's room. She was gone. Instantly they were both fully awake.

"It's Jim's grave she's gone to," ventured Deems. "Remember the way she said 'Oh!' that time I told how the rain loosened the stone? Come on, we'll go see."

In the dark when they were near the spot where the stone used to stand, they heard a moaning. They approached and found Martha caught under the stone, her body crushed, her dying breath coming slowly and heavily, carrying her words, "Let me go! Jim, let me go!"